



Even regular eBay users are sometimes unlucky when buying or selling. Jane Hoskyn presents 50 tips to help your fortunes rise without you falling under the hammer

20 TIPS FOR BUYING AT THE LOWEST PRICE

1 CHECK MISPELLED ITEMS

The basic law of eBay is that the more people who want to buy an item, the more bids it attracts and the higher the item's final selling price. So to secure a bargain, find the auctions few other people are bidding on. One way is by finding badly spelled auctions. 'Evlis' CDs and 'Toshiba' laptops go unnoticed by people typing the correct spelling into the Search box, so you face fewer rival bidders driving up the price. The Fat Fingers website (www.fatfingers.com) offers a fast, free way to find misspelled auctions. Type a term into the site's Search box to see a list of related misspellings going for a song on eBay.

2 GET CLEVER WITH SEARCH TERMS

Savvy search terms can uncover misspellings and alternative spellings of an item. An asterisk serves as a wild card in eBay's Search box, so if you type 'Can* dig* camera' (without the quote marks) eBay's search engine will return a list of auctions, including Canon digital cameras and misspelled 'Cannon' cameras. The latter attracts fewer bids and stays at a lower price. Brackets and commas are also useful. Type '(toshiba,toshiba)' and the list of results will

include both spellings. The words in brackets should be separated by a comma but no space.

3 CHECK THE WRONG CATEGORY

You can narrow your search by selecting an item category from the drop-down box on eBay's home page or on the left of the results page. But items can be listed in the wrong category, where they'll attract less attention and end up selling for less. If you leave the default All Categories option in the drop-down box and spend some time searching, you may find the Wii controller that slipped into the Nintendo DS category.

4 LOOK FOR ITEMS THAT HAVE NO PHOTO

Many people won't bid on an auction if it doesn't include a photo, or several photos if it's an expensive item. These auctions can be great places to find bargains. If you're not comfortable buying something you can't see, click on the 'Ask seller a question' link. You'll find it in the right-hand 'Meet the seller' box on the item page. Ask the seller to send you a photo by email.

5 TRY THE CLASSIFIEDS

eBay includes classified ads as well as auctions and Buy It Now sales, though at the moment this is an option only in eBay Motors (<http://motors.ebay.co.uk>). These items are a

fixed price. You don't complete the transaction through eBay; instead, you email the seller. To see classifieds, go to a category in eBay Motors and click the orange Classified Ads tab above the list of items. You could also try eBay-owned Gumtree (www.gumtree.com), which has a wider range of classifieds, organised regionally and with prices that frequently undercut eBay.

6 BID WHEN IT'S QUIET

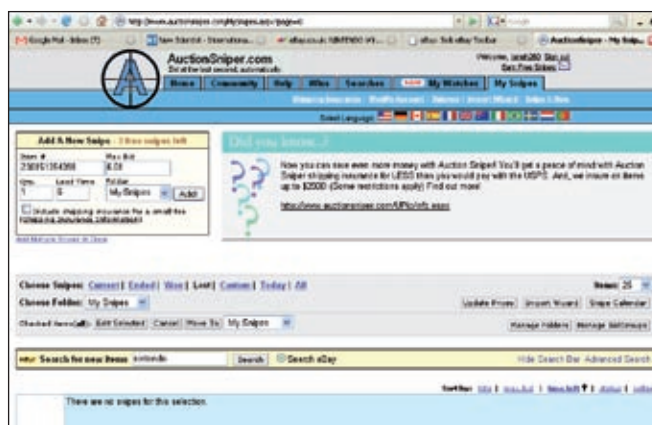
To ensure you have fewer rivals for an item, choose an auction that's timed to end during one of eBay's quiet periods, such as a weekday morning or at night. Most bids happen during the final half hour, so if an auction ends when everyone's at work or in bed, the price stays low. Avoid bidding on auctions that end on Sunday evenings or weekday lunchtimes or evenings, when bidders flock on to eBay. Traffic fluctuates with the seasons, too. Warm summer days are quiet and Christmas Day is eBay's slowest day of the year. However, bleak winter weekends bring the bids flooding in, especially in the run-up to Christmas.

7 KNOW WHAT IT'S WORTH

Before you bid, decide the maximum price you're prepared to pay and stick to it. Find out the item's market value by searching on Google. Go to www.google.co.uk and click on the



▲ Snapsearch is a search engine that allows you to research prices on eBay and the internet at the same time (see tip 7)



▲ A free web-based sniper such as AuctionSniper lets you avoid a bidding war by entering a bid automatically just before an auction ends (see tip 14)

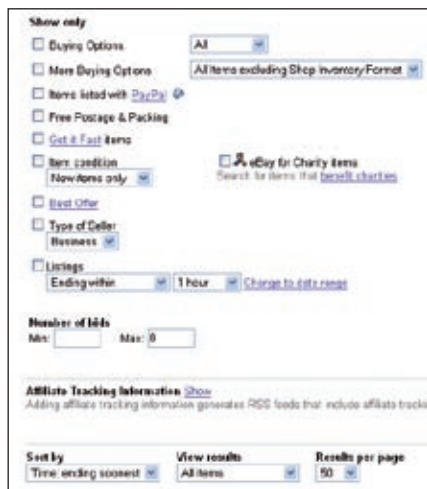
Products link above the Search box. Enter the model name, and its make if it's a common item, then click on Search Products. The results are filtered by relevance by default. Click in the Show Grid View box and select Sort by price: low to high. Also, look on eBay. Run a search for your item, then click on the Completed Listings box on the left of the listings page to see what people have paid for similar items in the past 15 days. You can run a Completed Listings search by clicking on the Advanced Search link to the right of eBay's main search box. Also search for the item on Snapsearch (www.snapsearch.com) to find out how much it's selling for on eBay.

8 KNOW YOUR RIVAL BIDDERS

Click on the History link to the right of the photo on the item page. This reveals how many bids have been placed, by whom, when, and how much was bid. Note the time of day each bidder tends to bid and swoop in with your slightly higher bid after you think they've logged off. If one person is placing lots of bids, you may have a fight on your hands and it might be worth letting them pay over the odds and then waiting for a similar item to come up for auction when you face less determined competition.

9 FIND BID-FREE ITEMS

To find auctions that have received no bids and end within 10 minutes, go to Advanced Search and type in your search term. Scroll to the 'Number of bids - Max' box and type in 0.



▲ You could pick up a bargain by searching for auctions that have received no bids (see tip 9)

10 BID IN PENNIES

Place your bids in odd increments. Most people bid in increments of 10p or 50p, so outbid them by just 1p or 2p to avoid pushing up the total too fast.

11 WAIT UNTIL THE LAST MINUTE

Don't bid on a newly listed item. This generates interest among rival bidders, triggering a bidding war and driving up the price. Instead, click on the 'Watch this item' link in the blue strip at the top of the item page and wait for eBay to email you when the auction is coming to an end. Bid at the last minute, provided the price hasn't gone above your well-researched maximum bid. Follow the progress of your watched items by clicking on My eBay at the top of any eBay page.

12 GET THE EBAY TOOLBAR

This free 3MB desktop application alerts you when your watched auctions are about to end, so you can swoop in with a last-minute bid without having to keep a constant eye on eBay. You can receive various desktop alerts via the toolbar, including Second Chance Offers for items you didn't win. Sometimes, if the reserve price for an item isn't met, or there is more than one of an item, the seller will let you buy at your maximum (losing) bid. Download the Internet Explorer eBay Toolbar from http://pages.ebay.co.uk/ebay_toolbar or a Firefox version from <http://myfriendlyfox.com/ebay>.

13 BID BY TEXT

If you'll be away from your computer when the auction ends, bid at the last minute by text message. To set a text alert for any item, click on the 'Text message' link to the right of the photo on the item page and type in your mobile number. eBay will SMS you when the auction is about to end or when you've been outbid, and you can increase your bid by texting back.

14 USE A SNIPER

To win without a bidding war, or if the auction ends in the middle of the night, use a free web-based sniper such as AuctionSniper (register free at www.auctionsniper.com) or Auction LotSnipe (www.auctionlotwatch.co.uk/lotsnipe.html). In AuctionSniper, type in the item number of an auction you want to win and enter your highest bid. The application automatically enters your bid a few seconds before the auction ends. After three free snipes, AuctionSniper

charges a small commission for every auction you win.

15 BUY IT NOW

Some auctions have a Buy It Now tag (BIN), which means you can buy the item immediately for a fixed price. These BIN prices undercut auction prices surprisingly often. This is partly because there's no bidding war, and also because BIN items are often sold by eBay Shops sellers who benefit from preferential listing fees and tend to pass on those savings to undercut their competition. To see BIN items only, run a search and click on the orange Buy It Now tab above the list of items.

16 HIT THE SHOPS

To find a directory of professional specialist sellers, click the eBay Shops link in the bottom-right box on the home page. Besides offering plenty of BIN bargains, eBay Shops sellers often charge lower postage and packing fees, especially if you buy more than one item from them. If you're particularly interested in a certain seller's items, click on the 'Add to favourite sellers' link in the 'Meet the seller' box on any of their item pages to receive email updates about their auctions.

17 BOARD THE EBAY EXPRESS

You can also find eBay Shops by clicking on the eBay Express box at the top left of the home page. This area of eBay is limited to brand-new items from eBay Shops sellers. It is a rich source of new, boxed, fixed-price items that are usually cheaper to buy here than from other online retailers.

18 LOOK ABROAD

With 233 million users in 37 countries and 100 million items for sale at any time, eBay truly is a global marketplace. The strong British pound means it's easy to find bargains from overseas, especially from the US. To browse international auctions, go to Advanced Search, type in your search term and select Worldwide in the Location drop-down box. Alternatively, click on the Location box to the left of a list of auctions and select Worldwide. You should only bid on items whose sellers say they'll ship to the UK. Check the shipping fees, and watch out for import duty and VAT. As the buyer, you are liable for these fees wherever they apply. Find details of duty rates at the HM Revenue & Customs website (<http://customs.hmrc.gov.uk>).



19 EMAIL A FRIEND

If you're not sure whether an item really is a bargain, click the 'Email to a friend' link to the right of the auction's main photo and send the page to someone whose advice you trust. Also visit specialist forums to pick up tips and ask questions. The Money Saving Expert site has an eBay bargains board at <http://forums.money-savingexpert.com/forumdisplay.html?f=40>.

20 USE PAYPAL

This eBay-owned secure payment service allows you to pay for your item as soon as you win an auction, with no cheques to send or clear and no financial details to reveal to your seller. People like to be paid this way because it's quick and reliable, so it's common for sellers to insist that bidders have a PayPal account. Not having one could mean you lose out on a bargain. Register free at www.paypal.co.uk, securely enter your bank details and use that account as your instant, private payment source.

20 TIPS FOR SELLING AT THE HIGHEST PRICE

1 PICK A GOOD USER ID

A good screen name is important. 'Del_boy' may be funny, but it won't instil confidence in buyers and that's half the battle as a seller. An unmemorable name such as 'jh52874' makes you sound unfriendly or spam-like. Make your ID catchy, positive and easy to remember. If you specialise in a type of item, reflect that in your ID. Good examples include 'vintagejunkie' and 'eureka_memorabilia'.

2 GATHER FEEDBACK FIRST

Build up a consistent record of positive feedback and prospective buyers will bid more often and be willing to pay higher prices. So before you sell your first item, buy a few small items to bump up your feedback score. Always post good feedback on buyers straight away; they'll be more likely to return the favour.

3 STRIKE WHILE THE MARKET IS HOT

Just as you buy at the lowest price when eBay is quiet, you sell at the highest price when eBay is busy. Use hype to your advantage. If you've got a loft full of Harry Potter books, auction them when the new film is released. Conversely, the balmy days of August are not the best time to sell a pair of ski boots. Do some research at eBay's Pulse section (<http://pulse.ebay.co.uk>) to discover the current hot items.

4 PERFECT YOUR TITLE

To start creating your auction listing, click on the Sell button at the top of any eBay page. The selling wizard takes you step by step through creating your listing, starting with the title. Here you are limited to 55 characters, so don't waste space with adjectives such as 'fabulous' as no-one searches for these. Instead, include key facts such as shoe size if you are selling footwear, and squeeze in synonyms, such as both notebook and laptop, to maximise your search engine success. Also use eBay acronyms such as NIB for 'new in box'. You'll find a list of acronyms at <http://pages.ebay.co.uk/help/newtoebay/acronyms.html>.

5 WRITE A WINNING DESCRIPTION

A strong eBay listing combines search-friendly words with concrete details that entice bidders. Keep in mind that this is an advert and a shop window, so make it eye-catching and irresistible. Refer to product information and market value from online stores such as Amazon, stating your source and including a link. Give details of condition, age and original use. Thanks to eBay's listing wizard, you don't need any HTML to create an eye-catching ad. Keep it easy to read, with bullet points and clear spacing. If you don't finish your listing, eBay automatically saves a draft for next time you're online.

6 BE HONEST

Gain bidders' trust by being upfront about flaws and try to anticipate the questions they may ask. eBay rules disallow authenticity disclaimers such as 'Genuine (??) Royal Doulton'. If you plan to wait for cheques to clear before posting items, say so.

7 USE GOOD PHOTOS

Your own well-lit digital photo is worth a thousand words. Some buyers are suspicious of auctions with stock photos downloaded from the internet. eBay's Picture Services charge a few pence to host more than one picture per auction, so get around this by taking lots of clear photos from different angles and uploading them to a free image host such as Photobucket (www.photobucket.com). Insert them in the body of your listing using the tag `<img src=http://www.yourserver.com/imagename.jpg>`.

8 DITCH THE EXTRAS

When you're creating your auction, eBay will try to sell you bold-text titles and fancy borders. These extras just cut into your profits



▲ Use eBay's Pulse section to establish how hot the market — and your item — is (see tip 3)

and rarely attract more bids. Save your cash. A well-worded title, clear description and good photos are much more important.

9 TURBO-CHARGE YOUR LISTINGS

If you're selling more than one item at a time, speed up the listing process by using the free eBay Turbo Lister tool. Download this small program free from http://pages.ebay.co.uk/turbo_lister. It will enable you to list many items at once and save listings to re-use whenever you want. Turbo Lister also includes HTML templates and a what-you-see-is-what-you-get (WYSIWYG) design editor. Make sure to cross-promote your different auctions with web links.

10 DON'T FLOOD THE MARKET

Avoid listing lots of items at once if they are all very similar. Sell them separately to maximise demand and increase the price. If you do want to list them at once, vary the wording of the titles and descriptions so that they show up in different searches.

11 START THE BIDDING LOW

Low starting prices of 99p or even 1p generate interest and increase traffic to your auction. The more bids an item has received, the more attractive it looks, leading to a higher selling price. The London Business School tested this theory and found that Nikon cameras with starting prices of 1p resulted in significantly higher selling prices than similar cameras whose starting prices had been higher.

12 DON'T OVERCHARGE FOR POSTAGE

It's increasingly common for sellers to charge inflated postage fees to get around eBay's listing charges, which are based on the item's net



▲ Take lots of clear photos of your item from different angles (see tip 7)



▲ Use the Turbo Lister tool to speed up the listing process (see tip 9)



TOP EBAY TIPS

selling price. But buyers are getting wise and won't even bother bidding if you charge £10 postage for a 1GB storage card.

13 GO FOR A 10-DAY AUCTION

When you're listing an item, select the 10-day auction length if you can. Research has shown that the longer your auction is live for, the higher the selling price will be. Three-day and five-day auctions tend to reach similar prices, but seven-day auctions fetch prices of 24 per cent more on average and 10-day auctions 42 per cent more.

14 PICK THE RIGHT END TIME

Time your auction to finish when a lot of potential buyers are online, but only up to a point. Auctions that end during eBay's 'happy hour' of between 6pm and 7pm are less likely to sell well than auctions that end a couple of hours either side. So many sellers end their sales during happy hour that there's a glut of supply. Aim for 8pm or 9pm instead. By default, your auction will end at the same time of day as you place it, one, three, five, seven or 10 days later. However, for an extra charge of 12p you can choose for your auction to start, and therefore end, on a day and at a time that's more likely to maximise your sale price.

15 KNOW YOUR TARGET BUYER

When timing your auction, think about when your target buyer is online. If you're selling a CD of clubbing tunes, don't time it to end at 9am on a Saturday. However, the morning is the perfect time to end an auction of baby clothes.

16 ACCEPT PAYPAL

If your buyer pays via PayPal, you pay extra commission of 3.4 per cent plus 20p, but it's worth it. Auctions that accept PayPal attract far more bids, because buyers like the speed and security of paying this way.

17 TREAT CUSTOMERS WELL

Top eBay sellers know that feedback is everything. Good customer service means good feedback. When someone wins your auction, drop them an email congratulating them and letting them know when you'll post the item. Pack the item securely and post it quickly, including a print-out of the auction page and a note saying thank you. Be courteous and helpful, and your reputation (and profits) will benefit.

18 USE SPECIAL SELLING DAYS

eBay regularly holds one-day sales for sellers, when listing fees are slashed to 10p, 1p or even nothing at all to encourage a flurry of

activity. If you sell a lot of items on eBay, these offers can save you lots of money in fees. However, you should avoid special selling days if you sell an item only now and then. The boosted competition from other sellers will just reduce your profits.

19 LEARN FROM OTHER SELLERS

eBay discussion boards such as Selling Tools Help Board (<http://forums.ebay.co.uk/forum.jspa?forumID=2009>) and New To Selling Help Board (<http://forums.ebay.co.uk/forum.jspa?forumID=3002>) are full of eBay staff and members with sales tips. To browse the forums, click on Community at the top of any eBay page and then click on Discussion Boards. eBay also has its own Wiki site (www.ebaywiki.com) compiled and edited by eBay members. It's part of the US eBay site, so some information is relevant only to US users, but it's worth a look for general tips.

20 IF ALL ELSE FAILS, HIRE AN EXPERT

If you're short of time and want a hand, use eBay's Trading Assistants Directory to find an experienced eBay member to do the selling for you. Many Trading Assistants specialise in certain categories and will sell your item for the maximum value, after they have deducted their fee, which you negotiate with them. To find an assistant, go to the Trading Assistant Directory (<http://tradingassistant.ebay.co.uk/ws/eBayISAPI.dll?TradingAssistant&page=main>) and search for someone near you.

10 TIPS FOR SAFE BUYING AND SELLING

1 DON'T RELY ON THE FEEDBACK SCORE ALONE

eBay sellers can often have hundreds of positive feedback comments, but you should always read their recent feedback. Five hundred 'positives' looks great, but if the last five comments were negative, they may not be quite the reliable trader they once were.

2 PAY VIA PAYPAL

With PayPal, your payment is traceable and all purchases are insured for £500 against fraud, loss, damage and non-delivery. To make a claim, go to www.paypal.co.uk and click on Security Centre and then on 'Open a transaction dispute'. You may then need to log in, if you are not already. Finally, click on 'Report a problem'. Claims must be made within 45 days of paying for the item. There is a scam where a buyer asks you to cash a cheque for a higher value and take your payment out of it. This sounds like the risk is on the buyer and it is tempting to take the cheque and save on PayPal fees. However, banks may release funds into your account before the cheque is cleared – you then post your item off only to find the cheque bounces weeks later.

3 KNOW YOUR RIGHTS

If you buy from an eBay Shop at a fixed price, you've got the same statutory rights as with any other online retailer, including the seven-day cooling-off period during which you can return an item for a full refund. If you buy via auction, the cool-off doesn't apply; the law simply says 'buyer beware'. As long as your purchase arrives as described, you've little legal redress. However, you can lodge a complaint

with eBay's Dispute Console; click on the link on the left of your My eBay page.

4 CHECK GOODS QUICKLY

As soon as your item arrives, open it and check that it's working and that everything is included. If it isn't, email the seller immediately. If the seller is uncooperative, file a complaint at the Dispute Console. The eBay team may suspend the seller from eBay.

5 DEAL WITH NON-DELIVERY THE RIGHT WAY

First, consider that the item might have got lost in the post. If the seller won't answer your emails, click on the Safety Centre link on eBay's home page. Click on Report a problem and complete the contact form with the item number and details of what happened. Attach any emails between you and your seller. If the seller has been the subject of many complaints and the police get involved, eBay may not let you know what's going on. You may know that action was taken only when the seller is suspended.

6 DEAL FAIRLY BUT FIRMLY WITH NON-PAYMENT

First, email your buyer, who may be ill or having computer trouble. If they don't respond, send a Payment Reminder from your My eBay page. If you still get no response, report the unpaid item in eBay's Dispute Console and file for a Final Value Fee credit. Your listing fees are repaid and you can re-list the item for free.

7 SPOT SPOOF EMAILS

Spoof or phishing emails are a growing problem for big companies such as eBay and PayPal. They are sent by scammers who may plant viruses in an email's links or attachments. If you get an email claiming to be from eBay and asking you to enter personal details such as a password or bank number, do not respond or click on any links. If you're suspicious about any email claiming to be from eBay, forward it to spoof@ebay.com. See the Community Question and Answer Board for the latest security and phishing warnings (<http://forums.ebay.co.uk/forum.jspa?forumID=7>).

8 AVOID FRAUDULENT FEEDBACK

If an eBay member offers to sell you good feedback, they're breaking the rules. You should go to the Safety Centre (<http://pages.ebay.co.uk/safetycentre>), click on the blue 'Report a problem' button and let eBay know.

9 KEEP THE TAXMAN HAPPY

Any profit you make selling on eBay counts as taxable income. eBay won't go voluntarily to the Inland Revenue with your details, but under the Data Protection Act the Inland Revenue can obtain details from eBay if they think that you are evading tax. See the government's guide to eBay and tax (www.hmrc.gov.uk/guidance/selling).

10 KNOW WHERE TO FIND HELP

eBay's Help section used to be hit and miss, but there's now an invaluable A-Z index of every single topic, from creating an About Me page to using eBay on your mobile phone (<http://pages.ebay.co.uk/help/index/A.html>). You can browse this index alphabetically, type in a search term, or just click the All link and read through everything.



▲ If you sell a lot on eBay, special selling days can save you a lot of money in fees (see tip 18)